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1. Loss of a friend

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Smudge saw Rusty going through the small flap in the door, almost immediately he greeted his friend "Hello, Rusty!" the ginger tom looked up to Smudge "You should have been awake an hour ago. The baby sparrows were out stretching their wings." he told Rusty. "Did you catch any?" his friend asked, Smudge yawned and licked his nose "Couldn't be bothered, I'd already eaten enough at home." he jumped to Rusty "Anyway, why weren't you up earlier? Yesterday you were complaining about Henry sleeping his time away, and today you're not much better yourself." Smudge watched Rusty sit down on the cold earth and curl his tail neatly around his paws listening to what the ginger cat had to say, "I was in the woods last night, remember?". "Oh, yes, I forgot! How was it? Did you catch anything? Or did anything catch you?" the flecked tom asked curiously. There was a silence before Rusty answered "I met some wild cats." "What?" Smudge said with a shocked voice "Did you get into a fight?" "Sort of." Rusty said proud. "Were you hurt? What happened?" Smudge asked worried. He listened as Rusty told the story "There were three of them. Bigger and stronger than any of us." "And you fought all three of them!" Smudge interrupted while his tail was twitching with excitement. "No!" the ginger said hastily "Just the youngest one; the other two came later." "How come they didn't shred you to pieces?" Smudge said full of disbelieve. "They just warned me to leave their territory," Rusty continued "But then..." another silence fell. "What!" Smudge said impatiently. "They asked me to join their Clan." Smudge's whiskers quivered disbelievingly. "They did!" Rusty said. "Why would they do that?" Smudge asked "I don't know," was the answer "I think they need extra paws in their Clan." "Sounds a bit odd to me," Smudge said doubtfully. "I wouldn't trust them if I were you." Rusty looked at Smudge with a sharp green gaze, Smudge himself doesn't have any interest in everything outside of his own garden, he is happy with his life and his housefolk takes good care of him. "But I do trust them," Rusty purred softly. "And I've made up my mind. I'm going to join them." Smudge stood up, he felt as if a cat had

scratched his heart "Please don't go, Rusty" he tried to convince his friend to stay "I might never see you again." Rusty nudged him affectionately with his head. "Don't worry." he told Smudge "My housefolk will get another cat. You'll get on with him fine. You get along with everyone!" "But it won't be the same!" the black-white tom wailed. "That's just the point." Rusty's tone changed "If I stay around here till they take me to the Cutter, I won't be the same either." "The Cutter?" Smudge asked confused. "The vet," the ginger said "To be altered, like Henry was." Smudge shrugged and stared down at his paws. "But Henry's all right," he mumbled as if he had given up on Rusty already "I mean, I know he's a bit lazier now, but he's not unhappy. We could still have fun." "I'm sorry Smudge. I'll miss you, but I have to go." he heard Rusty's voice but Smudge didn't reply, instead he stepped forward and gently touched Rusty's nose with his own. "Fair enough. I can see I can't stop you, but at least let's spend one more morning together." And so the two cats did. Smudge enjoyed this last morning with his best friend more than usual, they visited the old haunts. Shared some words with the cats. Smudge had felt that Rusty was getting more and more excited for his second journey into the woods. The morning had gone fast and at sunhigh the friends were in their own gardens again, Smudge said on a small grass patch watching Rusty on his fence. They said their last goodbye and Smudge followed Rusty jumping off the fence with his gaze. "I might never see him again." he thought sadly.

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A while has passed and Smudge had sat on his fence every day hoping that Rusty would return to his housefolk. He knew that they who had cared for Rusty had already given up on the ginger cat and had gotten a new she-cat. Smudge had talked to her quite a few times, but it didn't feel the same as talking to Rusty. He thought "Maybe I should check on him.", Smudge shook his head "No it's to dangerous." He turned around and leaped into his garden. "Hey" he heard a familiar voice and look to his side, the grey-blueish she-cat from Rusty's housefolk was sitting on the fence "Not now, Blue." he said and padded further, but later he felt Blue's presence beside him. "What's wrong?" the she-cat asked. "Ugh" Smudge thought but knew that he wouldn't get any further if he didn't tell her what was on his mind "It's Rusty, you know, the former cat of your

housefolk." "Yes, I know." Blue answered. "I miss him." Smudge said and looked at Blue. The she-cat tilted her head a little "Why don't you visit him then?" she asked. Smudge looked at her with a puzzled expression "It's too dangerous to go in the woods." he said. Blue shook her head "I am sure is not, a cat like you can go through anything!" Smudge smiled as he was happy that Blue encouraged him "She might not be that bad at all." he thought. "All right." he said and turned around, all the doubt has fled from his mind. He sprang over the fence and headed for the woods, he heard a faint "Tell me everything when you get back." from blue and smiled. "I will!" he shouted back to her and then he ran into the forest.

New senses flooded Smudge's mind as he padded deeper in the forest, the happiness he had felt when Blue had encouraged has turned into doubt. "Why did I do this again?" he asked himself when he heard rustling leaves and before he could react he saw a ginger shape flying through the air. He jumped in the air from the unexpected thing and made a run for it back to his safe garden, hoping the cat wouldn't follow him. A large branch was blocking his path and he slowed his path and clumsily tried to get on there, he felt the wild cat getting closer. Then he felt claws in his back which pulled him down to the ground, a terrified yowl escaped Smudge's mouth. He felt the grip loosen, he pulled himself away from the cat and crouched against the branch. He saw the cat lift his nose, he looked disgusted by Smudge's easy surrender. Smudge squacked almost unhearable. The ginger sniffed, Smudge was wondering how he was still alive. Then the cat spoke with a surprised and loud voice "Smudge!" Smudge was shocked "H-h-how d-d-do you know my n-name?" he asked still crouching. "It's me!" the wild cat said, Smudge looked confused at the ginger. "We were kittens together, I lived in the garden next to you!" the wild cat said loudly. Then Smudge jumped up with surprise and disbelieve "Rusty?" he asked "Is that really you? Did you find the wildcats again? Or are you living with new housefolk? You must be, if you're still alive!" Rusty spoke calmly "I'm called Firepaw now," the ginger said and Smudge watched Firepaw's shoulders relaxing and his fur fall flat. Smudge relaxed to and sat up "Firepaw?" he echoed, amused. "Well, Firepaw, it looks like your new housefolk don't feed you enough! You certainly weren't this scrawny last time we met!" Firepaw replied seriously "I don't need Twolegs to feed me," Smudge's

expression changed into a puzzled and serious look "I've got a whole forest of food to eat." Firepaw finished. "Twolegs?" Smudge asked "Housefolk. That's what the Clans call them." the ginger cat explained. Smudge expressions changed to complete astonishment "You mean you're really living with the wildcats?" "Yes!" he heard Firepaw say, but his word was followed by silence and then the cat's expression changed again "You know, you smell... different. Unfamiliar." "Unfamiliar?" Smudge echoed "I suppose you're used to the smell of those wildcats now." He watched Firepaw shake his head, "But we were kittens together. I should know your smell like I'd know the smell of my birth mother." Smudge stared at Firepaw "You've been to the Cutter!" a gasp came from the ginger's mouth "I mean the vet!" Smudge wasn't surprised by this sudden change in tone and just shrugged "So?" he said. Firepaw looked speechless. "Come on, then! What's it like, living wild?" Smudge demanded, trying to change the subject "Is it as good as you thought it'd be?" his question was followed by a long silence. "I know who I am now" was Firepaw's simple reply. Smudge tipped his head to one side and stared at his old friend "I should be getting home," he said "Mealtime soon." "Go carefully, Smudge" the ginger leaned toward him and gave him an affectionate lick between the ears. Smudge nuzzled the ginger in return. "And stay alert." Firepaw continued "There may be another cat in the area who is not as fond of kittypets---I mean, house cats---as I am." Smudge flicked nervously at these words. He looked around cautiously and leaped up onto the trunk of the fallen brach. "Good-bye, Rusty," he said "I'll tell everyone at home that you're okay!" "Bye, Smudge," he heard Firepaw say as he padded away "Enjoy your meal!". He sprinted through the woods back to his garden, hoping he wouldn't meet any other cat. Luckily he didn't and soon he padded out of the bushes waiting to be greeted by Blue. They walked back to their gardens as Smudge was telling the story, he had nearly never thought of Firepaw again. He was happy to have Blue at his side now.

The End